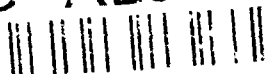


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BUFORD AT GETTYSBURG

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DANIEL D. DEVLIN  
United States Army

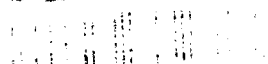
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BUFORD AT GETTYSBURG

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DANIEL D. DEVLIN  
United States Army

Dr. Jay Luvaas  
Project Advisor

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# ABSTRACT

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During the Civil War Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, then Brigadier General John Buford commanded the First Cavalry Division, Cavalry Corps, Army of the Potomac, U.S.A. He is generally credited with determining the importance of, and holding the ground near Gettysburg for the coming battle. This study examines the controversies surrounding Buford's actions and discusses whether the controversies have overshadowed the importance of the lessons to be learned from the events.

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## PREFACE

Two major battles in United States military history have always been of great interest to me: the Battle of Gettysburg in the Civil War and the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. In both cases, the outcome of the battle was determined not so much by great planning at the army level as by the actions of small, determined units that held strategic ground against superior forces; not to a conclusion, but to gain time until other forces could enter the battle or position themselves to strategic advantage.

Both battles were arguably turning points in the respective wars. The Battle of the Bulge was Hitler's last great offensive, beginning with a tremendous artillery barrage and accompanied by almost complete jamming of front line Allied radio communications. Similar in nature to the doctrine of Soviet offensives, this battle was a great lesson in preparing to fight the Soviets or Soviet trained forces. Considering the recent demise of the Soviet Union and its client states, my interest in this battle wanes for the moment, not forgetting the actions of individual units influencing the outcome of the fight.

My interest in the Battle of Gettysburg goes back as far as I can remember, to my first study of the Civil War. Throughout

those years, the study of the Civil War has gained increased attention, probably peaking with the U.S. Army's tremendous emphasis on Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's as a leader, based upon his actions at Gettysburg. While I agree that Colonel Chamberlain was a very effective leader, I always believed that many of the other outstanding leadership examples, on both sides, didn't receive an appropriate degree of emphasis. I've observed the Army's use of *Killer Angels* in numerous educational courses; only Colonel Chamberlain receives any real attention.

My own interests in the battle were drawn, for years, to General Buford's actions prior to, and during the opening hours of the battle. While attending the U.S. Army War College, I have had the opportunity to write on the subject. More importantly, I have had the opportunity to discuss the subject with Professor Jay Luvaas and other Civil War experts, and to conduct research using the materials located in the U.S. Army Military History Institute across the street from the War College.

This is a study that is only beginning. Edwin B. Coddington's wonderfully researched and footnoted book, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, provides the location of manuscripts and private collections all over the country that I look forward to exploring. Therefore, this work is my initial attempt to document the beginning of my research of the subject area.

## INTRODUCTION

Brigadier General John Buford commanded the 1st Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac, prior to and during the battle of Gettysburg. This much is accepted by all historians and written accounts of the battle. On most other facts, disagreement begins and on specific facts, varies greatly. The purpose of this paper is to examine the facts as presented in different accounts, discover the differences, and try to determine what is important in terms of the lessons to be learned from the battle.

In most accounts, General Buford receives, at least, a great deal of credit for determining the importance of the terrain just south of Gettysburg, for determining that the meeting of the two great armies will take place there, and for deciding that the ground was important enough to hold until the Army of the Potomac can move forward and occupy it:

The significant contribution which Buford's cavalry made to the final checkmate of the Confederates at Gettysburg has never received adequate recognition. . . . with not over 4,000 cavalrymen he delayed the advance of Hill's corps from Cashtown and Ewell's corps from Heidlersburg, causing the leading divisions of both to effect premature deployments. . . . It is not too much to say that Buford's cavalry was the major instrument that caused the battle to be fought at Gettysburg rather than elsewhere. . . .

While the above comments are generally accepted, critics insist that General Buford's First Cavalry Division did not play

as an important a role as generally claimed. One such critic, in a totally undocumented magazine article, claimed,

There is no acceptable evidence that Buford fought a cavalry action on the morning of July 1 that amounted to much. Buford's presence contributed to Heth's decision to pause at Herr Ridge to deploy, and in this way the cavalry helped delay the Confederates' arrival at McPherson Ridge until Union infantry were there. But it would be hard to argue that these events had a decisive influence on the outcome of the battle."

Additionally, disagreement exists over the type of weapons used, who was responsible for the tactics employed by the 1st Cavalry Division, the timing of the sequence of events that began the battle, and the location of leaders on the field during the opening hours. An attempt will be made to discuss most of these to determine their importance in learning the lessons of the battle. If definitive answers can be found, they will be provided. If no one answer is possible, both sides will be provided with a discussion of the issues.

The probability of resolving these issues is low, but the research and examination of the events should be worthwhile. Much of the argument over definitive answers may be unimportant to the outcome of the battle.



## THE MAN

John Buford was born in Kentucky, but entered West Point from the state of Illinois, where his family had moved. He was actually John Buford, Jr. and was called such until his father's death. John Buford, Sr. was known as Colonel John Buford, an influential and respected citizen of Kentucky and Illinois. He married twice; his first son, Napoleon B., by his first wife, graduated from West Point in 1827. He enjoyed a successful career as a banker and manufacturer before becoming distinguished in the War of the Rebellion.<sup>3</sup>

John Buford, Sr.'s second wife was the daughter of Captain Edward Howe who had served in the famed "Light Horse Legion" under Light Horse Harry Lee. Her son, John Buford, Jr. graduated from West Point in 1848, too late for service in the Mexican War, and was brevetted in the First Dragoons as a second lieutenant, receiving his commission in the Second Dragoons the following year.<sup>4</sup>

During the succeeding dozen years, Buford served in the West: Missouri, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas, Nebraska and Mexico. He served under Colonel William S. Harney, the famed Indian fighter and won a commendation for his conspicuous gallantry at Blue Water, Nebraska. He gained the attention of his superiors

as an excellent quartermaster, serving as the regimental quartermaster of the Second Dragoons.

In 1857, he took part in the Mormon War in Utah, and won praise from Albert Sidney Johnston, the expedition leader, and from P. St. George Cooke as a "most efficient and excellent officer." Returning to Washington D.C., he received his commission as a Captain in the Second Dragoons and was posted to Oregon. He rejoined his company in Fort Crittenden, Utah and remained there until 1861, when he was appointed in Washington, D.C. as a Major and Assistant Inspector General, testimony to his soldierly conduct and outstanding character.<sup>5</sup>

Four months later, Buford was appointed Brigadier-General of Volunteers and assigned as Chief of Cavalry of Major-General Nathaniel P. Bank's Second Corps, taking command of a four regiment brigade. He saw action almost immediately, directing his cavalry units in gallant action, both mounted and dismounted, fighting as cavalry or infantry as the situation demanded (and in striking contrast to the success of the Union cavalry to that time). Wounded at Second Manassas, a wound that for a time was considered mortal, he soon returned to duty and by May 1863, received command of the 1st Cavalry Division.<sup>6</sup>

He was considered as the soldier par excellence. . . . no man could be more popular or sincerely beloved by his fellow officers, nor could any officer be more thoroughly respected and admired by his men than he was. His company had no superior in the service. . . .

. . . He was a splendid cavalry officer, and one of the

most successful in the service; he was modest, yet brave; unostentatious, but prompt and persevering; ever ready to go where duty called him, and never shrinking from action however fraught with peril.

General Buford was unlike most cavalry officers of the day. Not disposed of fancy uniforms or personal fame and glory, and unlike most of his contemporaries, Buford's habit was never to allow newspapermen to accompany his command. Colonel Theodore Lyman's description of him when Buford visited Meade's headquarters is the best:

Yesterday came General Buford, commander of the Second Cavalry Division, and held a pow-wow. He is one of the best officers of that arm and is a singular-looking party, figurez-vous . . . a compactly built man of middle height, with a tawny moustache and a little, triangular gray eye, whose expression is determined, not to say sinister. His ancient corduroys were tucked into a pair of ordinary cowhide boots and his blue blouse is ornamented with holes; from one pocket thereof peeps a huge pipe, while the other is fat with a tobacco pouch. Notwithstanding this get-up, he is a very soldierly-looking man. He is of a good natured disposition but not to be trifled with. Caught a notorious spy last winter and hung him to the next tree, with this inscription: "This man is to hang three days: he who cuts him down before shall hang the remaining time."

This example indicates two traits of John Buford: a directness for dealing with the situation at hand, and a wry sense of humor. Both are shown again in a similar incident on the march north:

Passing near Frederick City, Md., a luckless spy happened to fall within our clutches. A drumhead court-martial dealt out prompt justice and his body was left hanging to a tree by the roadside. A committee of indignant citizens called on General Buford and wanted to know why he was hanged. General Buford informed them that the man was a spy and he was afraid to send him to Washington because he knew the authorities would make him a brigadier [sic] General.

John Buford did not appear to have much regard for spies, neither was he very fond of the practice of authorities in Washington of promoting cavalrymen and other officers directly from captain to brigadier general, with the newly appointed generals, now his equals, arriving in the field to lead troops.

As a troop and battalion commander, Gen. (then Capt.) BUFORD was among the first of the cavalry officers of the "old army" to depart from the cast-iron rule of Martinetism, and to treat the soldier as a thinking, reasoning being. He took especial [sic.] pains, as a troop commander, to dignify and elevate the non-commissioned officers of his troop, going so far in the interior management of his command as to convene a board of non-commissioned officers for the adjudication of matters personal to the men of his troop."

After the war, he was described by one of his troopers in this manner, "General Buford . . . many of us claim, was the best cavalry officer ever produced on this continent;" and by another as "a model commander."<sup>11</sup> Regardless of his appearance, he was obviously a first rate commander, who took care of his troops, in and out of a fight.

## THE RECON

The Union Cavalry was slow in getting established. The secession of the southern states wreaked havoc on the cavalry and dragoon units of the federal government as most of the better, and highest ranking, officers resigned to fight for the Confederacy. The Union had a few excellent cavalry officers, but not among the leadership. Consequently, the cavalry that did exist was employed poorly, partialled out in small units to divisions. The units were too small to be effective and any valuable reporting was usually too late, or never reached the leadership at all.<sup>12</sup>

The Confederacy was a society that naturally provided cavalrymen. All young men grew up riding, and they knew how to care for their animals. The quality of horse flesh was also superior because of the natural interest in equestrian skills. The southern society was mostly rural; young men comfortable in the outdoors, hunters, possessing the woodsman's skills of tracking and terrain appreciation.

The North was already much more an urban society, providing young men who were accustomed to wagons and buggies, not horseback riding. The early Union Cavalry training required teaching riding (literally getting on and staying on the horse),

a learned skill, not a natural one. The appreciation for weapons also had to be taught. Too often, marching with sabres was endless drill, with pistols and horses provided shortly before leaving for action.<sup>13</sup>

Leadership remained the main problem for the Union. Through Scott, McClellan, Burnside and Pope's leadership, cavalry remained too small in numbers and broken up into small units, detached to subordinate commands. Under Pope's command, at least progress was made in leadership. Bayard and Buford were given brigades, and both provided all cavalry functions to the best of their ability.

With Hooker's command came cavalry reorganization. A cavalry corps was formed under command of a cavalryman and answering directly to the army command. The Union Cavalry began to hold its own against the southern cavalry. By the spring of 1863, leaders like Buford were standing up to, and even challenging, J.E.B. Stuart himself. The action at Brandy Station marked the end of Confederate cavalry domination in the Civil War.<sup>14</sup>

General John Buford's First Cavalry Division had responsibility for the left front of the Army of the Potomac, tracking Lee's army as it moved north in the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys and crossed into Pennsylvania. Through a misunderstanding of orders, Stuart was conducting a raid around the entire Union army and Lee marched north without the eyes of

his cavalry. The stage was thus set for a battle as Buford and his saddle-weary troopers rode into Gettysburg on the 30th of June 1863, with the Army of the Potomac now under General George Meade's command.

General Buford's scouts had run into patrols from Confederate General Ambrose P. Hill's corps which had drawn close to Gettysburg and into the town itself. They quickly departed as the First Division entered the town and as Buford sent his scouts further north and west, they encountered more of Hill's men. Buford set up his defense of the city, with Gamble's Brigade straddling the Chambersburg Pike and Devin's Brigade stretched further north to the Mummasburg Road. Buford liked the high ground just south of the town and was determined to hold it for Reynolds and Meade, if they could reach it in time.<sup>15</sup>

The pure logic of a cavalryman would explain Buford's appreciation for this terrain and his desire to hold it. He had traveled over the terrain to the south, and having located the enemy force, would naturally want to hold the ground that he considered the most defensible. He knew that Meade did not want to take the offensive; that dictated the need for good defensible terrain.<sup>16</sup>

That logic also explains his tactics: dismounting his troopers to act as infantry, causing the enemy to slow and deploy, capable of holding the ground forward as long as possible, and then quickly moving by horseback to the next

defensive position. All he needed was to buy enough time for Reynold's Corps to move forward and support him.

This was the classic covering force battle: deceiving the enemy as to force type, size, disposition, intent and location; forcing the enemy to buy every foot of ground at the highest cost possible in men and equipment; gaining as much time as possible in exchange for the space relinquished; and forcing the enemy to deploy his forces, identifying his type, size, disposition, intent and location, and thereby disrupting his plan.



## THE FIGHT

As the lead 3rd Indiana skirmishers of General Buford's main column entered Gettysburg, men of Brigadier General J. J. Pettigrew's Confederate brigade, who had been looking for supplies (particularly shoes) in and near Gettysburg, departed to the northwest along the Chambersburg Pike. The citizens of Gettysburg welcomed Buford and his men and quickly provided information (although exaggerated) about the Confederate units' activities in the Gettysburg area for the past few days. Pettigrew's men were part of Major General Henry Heth's division and Lieutenant Ambrose P. Hill's Third Corps, indicating the presence of the bulk of the Army of Northern Virginia nearby. Of major interest was the fact that no mention was made of General J. E. B. Stuart's cavalry.

General Buford was convinced that the enemy main force was approaching Gettysburg, that the terrain just south of the town was key to defending the immediate area, and that the battle would be joined in the next few hours. With that in mind he ordered his brigade commanders to set up their defense in depth:

Along the Chambersburg Pike, Colonel William Gamble's brigade sent out pickets as far as four miles from Gettysburg towards Cashtown. The main body of the brigade was located on

McPherson's Ridge, a defensible ridgeline forward of Seminary Ridge which itself was forward of the town and Cemetery Ridge to the south. Colonel Gamble's pickets were placed on and forward of Herr Ridge, yet another terrain feature forward of his main body on McPherson's Ridge. The brigade's southernmost point was about the Fairfield Road (Chambersburg Pike), stretched to the north to the railroad grade, just north of the Chambersburg Pike.

North and slightly northeast of Colonel Gamble's right, the location of Colonel Thomas C. Devin's brigade began at the railroad grade between the Chambersburg Pike and the Mummasburg Road, and stretched to the Mummasburg Road with vedettes posted further to the east as far as the York Pike. This placement covered all roads leading to Gettysburg from the north and northeast to warn of any approach of the enemy on the cavalry's right flank. This included the Middletown and Heidlersburg Roads.

At about 5:00 A.M., General Heth's men left Cashtown toward Gettysburg. Before moving very far they encountered Colonel Gamble's forward most pickets, who fell back to report the enemy's movement. The appearance of pickets that far from Gettysburg surprised the Confederates and caused some hesitation, but not for long. This first encounter occurred about 5:30 A.M. and resulted in the first shots fired in the Gettysburg battle. The shots alerted the cavalry waiting on McPherson Ridge and preparations were completed for the coming engagement."

When the pickets returned to the skirmish line, a detachment of the 8th Illinois Volunteer Cavalry rode out about a mile forward of Willoughby Run and engaged the enemy again, until forced back with the loss of one man killed. This was the first of the delay movements to the rear, using their mounted capability.<sup>13</sup>

The Confederate force continued forward and by 8:30 A.M., they ran into the main body of General John Buford's division, three of every four men dismounted forward, with the fourth holding all four horses to the rear. This most certainly confused the Confederates. Not realizing that the force was only cavalry, but assuming that dismounted troops must include infantry, the force deployed for the attack. Just changing formations requires time, and every minute spent by the Confederates was a minute gained for General Buford in his wait for relief by General John F. Reynold's First Corps.<sup>14</sup>

A second factor in the delay of the Confederate force was the difference in individual weapons. General Buford's cavalry was equipped with mostly single-shot, breech loading carbines. General Heth's division was armed almost entirely with muzzle loaders, requiring more time, and more importantly, an upright position to load. The cavalrymen, using rocks, fences and trees as natural cover, could load from that position, much more rapidly. Some of the men were even armed with the Spencer repeating rifle<sup>15</sup> that held seven rounds in a tube in the stock;

a rifle, it was said, for all week. The ability to fire without standing, while reloading much more quickly, and particularly the ability of the Spencer repeaters to fire seven rounds in the same time as the Confederate muzzle loader's one, may very well have added to the confusion of the southern forces. The number of shots coming from the small cavalry force may very well have seemed like a much larger, although still fairly small and weak, infantry unit.

By 10:30 A.M., the cavalry had been forced back to McPherson Ridge, greatly outnumbered, but capable of moving from Herr Ridge to McPherson Ridge, to set up a new defense rapidly, because of their horses. At each successive defensive position, they were able to hold until the last possible second, then run back, mount up and move to the next position, thus holding off numerous charges by the enemy until clearly outnumbered and forced back. Just when the Confederates were sure that they faced only a relatively small cavalry unit alone, General Reynold's lead elements reached McPherson Ridge, were quickly deployed, and the battle of Gettysburg began in earnest.

As the infantry poured into the battle, relieving Buford's greatly outnumbered force, and as General Reynolds directed the 2nd Wisconsin, the "Iron Brigade," into the line in McPherson's Woods, he was struck behind the right ear by a bullet from a rebel fusillade and fell from his horse, dead. This loss of the North's best tactical general officer temporarily threw the

Union's leadership on the field into some disorder as evidenced by General Buford's urgent message to Major General Pleasonton, Commander of the Union Cavalry Corps, in the rear:

HEADQUARTERS FIRST CAVALRY DIVISION

July 1, 1863--3.20 p. m.

I am satisfied that Longstreet and Hill have made a junction. A tremendous battle has been raging since 9.30 a. m. with varying success. At the present moment the battle is raging on the road to Cashtown, and within short cannon-range of this town. The enemy's line is a semicircle on the height, from the north to west. General Reynolds was killed early this morning. In my opinion, there seems to be no directing person.

JNO. BUFORD

Brigadier-General of Volunteers

General PLEASONTON.

P. S.--We need help now."

Fortunately, Major General Abner Doubleday believed that he understood Reynolds intent, and as he temporarily assumed command, he continued to reinforce the Union line on Seminary and McPherson's Ridges, falling back to Seminary from McPherson only when the Confederate forces were able to overwhelm the Union line in sheer numbers.

General Buford's Division was not done fighting for the day. Colonel Gamble's Brigade massed on the southern flank of the Union line, near the Hagerstown Pike, to prevent an enemy attempt at turning the flank. Their actions there against an advancing Confederate line from Brigadier General James H. Lane's brigade of Major General William D. Pender's division inspired one of the staff officers of General Winfield S. Hancock, the II<sup>d</sup> Corps commander who had now assumed command of the Union force on the

field, to remark later that Gamble's cavalry came on, "as steady as if on parade." General Hancock, impressed as well, recalled the troopers' advance, "among the most inspiring sights" of his career.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, Colonel Devin's brigade of Buford's division moved from the line and reformed on the right flank of the Union line, stretched from the Carlisle Road north of the town, to the Rock Creek crossing of the road from Harrisburg. Pickets were sent as far east as the York Pike to establish warning on the extreme right flank. The lower "U" of the famous hook shape of the Gettysburg battle had now been formed.

Colonel Devin's men got a brief rest, but before noon were faced with more Confederates, the advance forces of General Ewell's corps, advancing from the north in as great a strength as A. P. Hill's had from the northwest. Employing similar tactics as before, fighting and falling back, Devin's men held back forces advancing on both the Carlisle and Heidlersburg Roads. The tired cavalry fought for nearly two more hours, gradually falling back until relieved by Major General Oliver O. Howard's XIth Corps, coming from the south through Gettysburg. Devin then formed his brigade along the York Pike, again protecting the right flank, until the remainder of the Union force arrived from the south to complete the deployment on the field.<sup>13</sup>

General Buford's choice of ground and tactics allowed holding the strategic ground to the rear until relief moved

forward to him. While not unheard of before, the dismounting of cavalry was rarely used by the Confederates up to this time, and not frequently used by other than Buford, until after Brandy Station and Gettysburg.

## THE QUESTIONS

Controversy over the beginning of the Battle of Gettysburg has continued since its conclusion. The lack of absolutes to satisfy all critics is best answered by Clausewitz' description of the fog of war. Although the 128 volumes of the Department of War's *Official Record* attempted to accurately describe the facts of the war, much of the description is subjective and biased. Concerning Gettysburg, many of the Confederate leaders' opinions were effected by a desire not to accept a major share of the blame for the defeat. On the Union side, the same is true of leaders who didn't want to accept responsibility for the tremendous casualties.

To some extent, human memory can be blamed for exaggeration or underestimation of events, and a simple lack of understanding of what was transpiring during such an intense period of stress. Finally, historians, writers and critics examining the battle often failed to understand historical changes taking place in tactics, weaponry, leadership, strategy and shaping of the battlefield. Anyone studying the Battle of Gettysburg within a framework of accepted traditional mid-Nineteenth Century tactics would not understand changes taking place on the modern battlefield of the time as the result of visionary leaders who



were shaping the battlefield of the future. Presented here are a few of the most critically examined questions of the opening hours of the Gettysburg Battle.

# THE GROUND.

The generally accepted account of the choice of Gettysburg as a battlefield is that it was largely accidental, in that no commander sat down and pointed to Gettysburg on a map and declared that the battle would be fought there.<sup>14</sup> Gettysburg is often described as a classic meeting engagement. Two giant armies, aware of each others existence and general intentions, both knowing that the battle would be joined again soon -- but where? The difference between the two was that only one moved with eyes. General J. E. B. Stuart's raid around the entire Army of the Potomac, however well intentioned, left General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia without its reconnaissance ability, the cavalry.

Therefore, while both armies moved without an intentional place of battle, it is not entirely fair to say that no one chose the ground. General Meade's army had eyes, the excellent, experienced cavalry eyes of a cavalry commander who clearly understood his mission: the fact that a battle was coming soon, the intent of his army commander to fight defensively, and the need for good terrain to establish a defensible position. Thus, Brigadier General John Buford chose the ground, understanding that his immediate superior, Major General John Reynolds, would back his decision and support him.<sup>15</sup>

Gettysburg was not a classic meeting engagement. If both army commanders had moved toward each other, with reconnaissance elements leading and reporting the ground and disposition of the enemy, and in this way met at Gettysburg, the meeting engagement description would fit. Buford saw the ground, located the enemy, and decided, based upon his knowledge that Meade wanted to fight defensively, that the strategic ground just south of Gettysburg must be retained for the fight that he knew was only hours away. In this decision, Buford set up a covering force for the defense, in order to hold the ground, slow the enemy and cause him to deploy early. Lee was left with two choices: attack or withdraw. Meade's intent was honored, he had his defensive battle.

Here again, disagreements arise: claims that Buford, upon locating the enemy, should have retraced his steps and allowed the fight to take place where the army was located on the night of 30 June; arguments that Buford overstepped his authority in deciding to hold the ground at Gettysburg; a charge that his position at Gettysburg on the morning of July 1st was purely accidental; and the notion that Buford didn't really choose the ground, but simply reacted to the enemy's movements. All these arguments are negligent in the classic use of cavalry in this operation, and a complete lack of understanding of the trust and confidence between Buford and Reynolds.

## THE TACTICS.

A great deal of discussion has taken place over the tactics employed by General Buford on the morning of July 1st, 1863. One argument credits Buford with changing the way cavalry fought for the future and employing tactics that lay the groundwork for future infantry concepts including airborne, air assault, mechanized and motorized units. Another says that Buford made a huge mistake in trying to protect the town of Gettysburg;<sup>55</sup> that he should have defended Cemetery Ridge from the start, since the city was not of tactical importance. Still another is that no evidence exists to prove that a real cavalry battle took place, that Buford delayed the enemy advance, or that he recognized the importance of holding that particular ground.

The great mass of evidence, in the form of personal accounts and messages, certainly indicates that Buford knowingly fought a classic delay: stalling the enemy advance as much as possible, causing the enemy to deploy earlier than planned, creating attrition of the enemy at a highly favorable ratio in comparison to his own losses, and trading space for time until the force approaching from the rear could arrive and defend the ground in strength. The fact that he began his delay as far forward as he did, including the town inside his perimeter, simply allowed greater space to trade, with more natural barriers. This is

echoed in Major General Reynold's message to General Meade after he reached Buford and was apprised of the situation:

The enemy is advancing in strong force, and I fear he will get to the heights beyond the town before I can. I will fight him inch by inch, and if driven into the town, I will barricade the streets and hold him back as long as possible.<sup>27</sup>

The question remains of Buford's habit of fighting his troopers dismounted. He was a dragoon by experience and also learned tactics fighting Indians in the west. The following incident later on July 1st best explains his beliefs:

A stand was made just south of the town on Cemetary Ridge, which the enemy did not assault with much vigor. During the day General Buford received an order from General Doubleday to charge the enemy in a certain position; but seeing at a glance the inconsistency of ordering cavalry to charge upon infantry, who were protected by a stone fence, he ordered a part of the Eighth Illinois and Third Indiana to dismount and drive the enemy from their position; which they did in the most gallant manner, and to the entire satisfaction of their General, who referred to the incident as being a brilliant affair.<sup>28</sup>

General Buford chose his tactics to match the situation, providing the best chance of success for his men. These tactics were used more by other cavalry commanders on both sides as the war went on. Buford's successes in employing these tactics obviously were not lost on others.

## THE TIME.

Historians argue over the exact time that the battle started, when General Reynolds arrived on the field and when he was killed, how long Buford's cavalry actually held back the enemy, what time the First Corps infantry units arrived, and what time the Union forces were forced off McPherson's Ridge. For exact historical purposes, perhaps that's necessary. Certainly, many of the times listed in reports were estimates, or times from watches that differed greatly. Watches were simply not as accurate, nor were they set from the same source.<sup>3</sup>

The important factor would seem to be the sequence. From reports and accounts, that comes out rather straightforward. After all, is it important that Buford's cavalry held the enemy for two hours rather than one hour and forty-five minutes, or that he held the enemy until reinforced and relieved by the infantry? Holding for ten minutes would be satisfactory if it were long enough.

Whether General Reynolds fell at 11:30 A.M., 12:30 P.M. or 1:30 P.M. does not seem as important as the fact that he was gone as the leader. Buford's message to Pleasonton indicated that it was in the morning and after about three and half hours, he still didn't feel that anyone was in control. That's important!

## THE WEAPONS.

A great deal has been written regarding the difference made at Gettysburg by Spencer repeaters on the Union side. Little evidence exists to show that Spencer repeating carbines were issued to anyone. Spencer repeating rifles were issued to several of the units of Buford's Division, the exact number is not clear.<sup>30</sup> More important is the fact that almost all of Buford's force had breech loading weapons, mostly carbines.<sup>31</sup> This factor allowed better cover while loading, faster reloading and firing, and easier movement, particularly when mounted.

Statements obtained from Confederate prisoners indicates that the volume of fire surprised the Confederate force and confused them.<sup>32</sup> This may have accounted for early deployment of the force from column to line, and in hesitation because of the uncertainty of the type and size of the force. The number of muzzleloaders abandoned on the field, unfired, seems extraordinarily high, and much higher than at previous engagements.<sup>33</sup> The results in the battle almost certainly influenced the later purchase of thousands of Spencers, both carbines and rifles.<sup>34</sup> Also unknown is the number of these weapons on the field at Gettysburg that were individually owned, or purchased privately for units.

## THE LESSONS

Historians search for accuracy in documenting the Battle of Gettysburg, as with all historical accounts, is important. The important lessons to be learned from General Buford's actions at Gettysburg have been lost in this search for absolutes. Every officer's training school in the U. S. Army, and the U. S. Marine Corps, emphasizes the importance of terrain appreciation. Additionally, the importance of speed, tempo, and mass; the need to keep your superiors informed of your actions; the importance of taking the initiative when events occur that call for decision making that could influence the outcome of the battle; the need for innovation when normally accepted training methods don't apply to the situation at hand; and the need for trust and confidence, and loyalty, up and down among commanders.

Brigadier General John Buford's actions at Gettysburg directly apply in all of these cases. The events that unfolded could have been a classic meeting engagement, but in this engagement were an action in which the dominating force to this date was operating with a disadvantage: his reconnaissance capability was extremely limited. Buford understood his superior commander's intent. He alone, at the division level or higher, had seen all the ground between his superior and where his force



was now located. His mission was to reconnoiter the ground (decent maps of the Gettysburg area were not available in Meade's headquarters until after they entered into contact), locate the enemy, keep his superiors informed, and track the enemy. His mission was clear; so much so that in encountering a small force of General Heth's Confederates, who attempted unsuccessfully to ambush him on the 30th of June, Buford was not distracted from his mission. He did not become decisively engaged with the enemy, bypassing them instead, in order to accomplish his mission. He recognized the importance of the heights to the south of Gettysburg, a town that was geographically important because of the road and rail networks that crossed in it. Buford correctly identified the location and movement of the enemy, and was determined to hold strategic ground in order for his commander to accomplish his intent. To argue that the short cavalry battle on the morning of the 1st of July was of no significance to the outcome of the battle ignores the strategic importance of the terrain and Buford's recognition that his commander needed it. Major Joseph G. Rosengarten's account of the relationship between Buford and Reynolds, often quoted by other authors writing of the battle, perhaps says it best:

Reynolds knew Buford thoroughly, and knowing him and the value of cavalry under such a leader, sent them through the mountain passes beyond Gettysburg to find and feel the enemy. The old rule would have been to keep them back near the infantry, but Reynolds sent Buford on, and Buford went on, knowing that wherever Reynolds sent him, he was sure to be supported, followed, and secure. . . . Buford and Reynolds were

soldiers of the same order, and in each found in the other just the qualities that were most needed to perfect and complete the task entrusted to them. The brilliant achievement of Buford, with his small body of cavalry, up to that time hardly appreciated as to the right use to be made of them, is but too little considered in the history of the battle of Gettysburg. It was his foresight and energy, his pluck and self-reliance, in thrusting forward his forces and pushing the enemy, and thus inviting, almost compelling their return, that brought on the engagement of the first of July.

Buford counted on Reynold's support, and he had it fully, faithfully, and energetically. . . . When he got Buford's demand for infantry support on the morning of the first, it was just what Reynolds expected, and with characteristic energy, he went forward, saw Buford, accepted at once the responsibility, and returning to find the leading division of the First Corps (Wadsworth's), took it in hand, brought it to the front, put it in position, renewed his orders for the rest of the corps, assigned the positions for the other divisions. . . .

The tremendous trust and confidence, the understanding in each other's abilities, allowed Buford's actions, culminating in the battle beginning on the morning of the first of July, 1863. That Major General John F. Reynolds was killed on the field that day; and that Brigadier General John Buford died in December 1863, almost two years before the conclusion of the war, detract completely from the exact communications, intentions and actions, since neither could take part in the extensive after-action details that followed the struggle.

## THE CONCLUSION

In teaching the officers that will make up the leadership of the army of the future, the U. S. Army attempts to use the lessons of history in order to present lessons for the future. The frequent use of Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's actions at Gettysburg is certainly an example; actions that kept the Confederate force from taking Little Round Top, and perhaps turning the right flank of the Union forces on Cemetery Ridge.

Still, the events that literally chose the ground for the battle, that determined Gettysburg as the site for the meeting of the two armies on the move, that allowed the Army of the Potomac to occupy ground strategically important to its commander's intent, are rarely used, certainly not written about in training manuals, as clear examples of many of the traits that the U. S. Army and other military branches want their officers to know and use to advantage. The actions of Buford's small force that day are largely ignored, or criticized because of details that can neither be confirmed or denied, but are not significant to the overall effect of the actions taken.

Brigadier General John Buford is similarly ignored by the teachers of modern military history. A dragoon by background and experience, lauded by superiors and subordinates for his

abilities as an officer, leader, cavalryman and commander. A leader who employed tactics unusual for the time; not new, not for the first time, but not frequently used up to that time in the conflict; but, used more extensively by both sides in that conflict, and employed widely in various forms in later conflicts: the ability to move an infantryman rapidly from one part of the battlefield to another in order to influence the outcome of the fight. Only a determined few, who fought with him, knew him, admired him and understood the importance of his actions, collectively recognized his accomplishments: first, when they learned of his death; and again, after the war, in ensuring that a monument to his memory was left on the battlefield to mark the location of the action on July 1st, 1863.

Learning of his death, his former staff officers resolved:

That we, the staff officers of the late Major General John Buford, fully appreciating his merits as a gentleman, soldier, commander, and patriot, conceive his death to be an irreparable loss to the cavalry arm of the service. That we have been deprived of a friend whose sole ambition was our success, and whose sole pleasure was in administering to the welfare, safety and happiness of the officers and men of his command. . . . That we look upon his character as a model of high integrity and modesty, united with the sympathies of a heart alive to every tender emotion, as well as indifference to personal inconvenience and danger. . . . and in his death the cavalry has lost a firm friend and most ardent advocate. That we are called to mourn the loss of one who was ever to us as the kindest and tenderest father. . . .<sup>55</sup>

and upon his return from Buford's funeral, First Cavalry Division

Commander Brigadier General Wesley Merritt issued the following general order:

HEADQUARTERS FIRST CAVALRY DIVISION

CULPEPPER, Virginia, December 22d, 1863

General Orders.

Soldiers of the First Cavalry Division, we have lost our chief. Our gallant leader, our heroic General, our kind and sympathising friend has been taken from us by the afflicting hand of Divine Providence. We bow submissive to the dispensation, but we mourn, as mortals must, our irreparable loss.

It is not for me to relate his virtues. Not a soldier in this command need be told of his qualities. You know his gallantry and chivalric nature. Gettysburg attests his glory. Beverly Ford and the scenes around you here bear witness to his never-dying fame. You need not be reminded of his goodness of heart, his sympathetic nature, his high, sensitive, noble feeling; they were all exhibited in the kind tenderness he has always shown for our sick and wounded comrades, and the solicitude for the safety of each man in his command. His master mind and incomparable genius as a cavalry chief, you all know by the dangers through which he has brought you, when enemies surrounded you and destruction seemed inevitable.. The dying words of your wounded comrade, "*I am glad it is'nt the General,*" [sic.] bear testimony to your unutterable love.

But now, alas! "*It is the General!*" "*He has fought his last fight!*" No more forever will you see his proud form leading you on to victory. The profound anguish which we all feel forbids us the use of empty words, which so feebly express his virtues. Let us silently mingle our tears with those of the nation in lamenting the untimely death of this pure and noble man, the devoted and patriotic lover of his country, the soldier without fear and without reproach.

W. MERRITT

Brigadier General of Volunteers Commanding

The respect and admiration shown by those around him, those who served under him, those who were actually at the battle, are very clearly in evidence in their written respects, mourning not just the loss of a friend, but the loss of a great leader and soldier.

Finally, three anecdotes about General Buford recounted shortly after his death:

Major-General Buford, than whom probably no commander was so devotedly loved by those around him, was offered a major-general's commission in the rebel army when in Utah. He crushed the communication in his hand, and declared that he would live and die under the flag of the Union. . . . When General Buford received his commission as Major-General [author's note: the day that he died], he exclaimed: "Now, I wish that I could live." His last intelligible words, uttered during an attack of delirium, were: "Put guards on all the roads, and don't let the men run back to the rear." This was an example of the ruling passion strong in death, for no trait in General Buford's character was more conspicuous than his dislike to see men skulking or hanging on the rear.

Even in death, his thoughts were of his responsibilities of leadership and for his men.

Perhaps the biggest lesson to be learned from the lack of knowledge and teaching of Buford and his actions at Gettysburg is that if your rater dies on the field, and you do not live to the end of the conflict to take part in the after-action accounts, your part in the events may not be properly addressed. This would probably not bother John Buford too much. His interests lay in accomplishing the mission and the welfare of his men, not in personal fame and glory.

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2. Russell F. Weigley, "John Buford-A Personality Profile," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, V, no.3 (June 1966): 14-23.
3. James H. Wilson, Brevet Major-General, "Major-General John Buford," *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association*, VIII, no. 30 (September 1895): 174-5.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. and Russell F. Weigley, "John Buford-A Personality Profile," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, V, no. 3 (June 1966): 15-16.
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7. Wilson, 175-6.
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22. Edward G. Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg, A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations During the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign 9 June - 14 July 1863* (Cranbury, NJ, London & Mississauga, Ont.: Associated University Press, 1986) 191.
23. Ibid., 189-90.
24. Coddington, 260-1.
25. Stackpole, 133-4; Henry P. Moyer, *History of the 17th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry* (Lebanon, PA: Sowers Printing Company, 1911), 60.
26. Miles [Walter E. Day], *The Campaign of Gettysburg* (London: Forster Groom & Co., Ltd., Not dated), 146-7.
27. James Stuart Montgomery, *The Shaping of a Battle: Gettysburg* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1959), 50.
28. Abner Hard, M.D., *History of the Eighth Cavalry Regiment Illinois Volunteers, During the Great Rebellion* (Aurora, IL: No publisher noted, 1868), 258.
29. Coddington, 262-3, Note: 682-3.



30. Buckeridge, 55.
31. Coddington, 258.
32. Buckeridge, 55-6.
33. Ibid., 48-9.
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